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Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia

Review by Sarah Edwards¹

This ambitious and wide-ranging monograph proposes that ‘nostalgia has been an important but rarely acknowledged aspect of the radical imagination’ (1). Bonnett’s study traces the politics of the left, from early English socialism in the later eighteenth century to contemporary psychogeography, and discovers a common narrative of progress. Within this often naive celebration of the future, newness and youth, Bonnett argues that nostalgia has always been present as a repressed, but inevitable, aspect of modernity.

Bonnett’s work begins with a historical and conceptual overview which attempts to delineate the shifting relationships between radicalism and nostalgia. He acknowledges the complexity of the term, observing that in a post-socialist era radicalism is as likely to be associated with ‘fundamentalist Islam or a new business plan’ as with the left (6). He also notes that many socialists and feminists have sought to dissociate themselves from the term, though he does not expand much on the reasons for this discomfort. While I accept his premise that radicalism and the left have been historically intertwined, and that is the focus of this book, it might still have been useful at the start to examine the connotations of radicalism in more depth. The book’s sub-title suggests a broader focus and situating some of the discussions on socialism, for example, within the wider cultural landscape and other forms of radicalism (whether business-oriented or religious), might further illuminate the relationships between radicalism, nostalgia and the left. Are there, for example, similar attitudes to nostalgia among groups that are either self-styled, or designated as, radicals?

Bonnett’s definition of nostalgia concurs with that of most scholars, who identify a transition in meaning from homesickness characterised by physical symptoms to a longing for another time or a ‘sentimentalization of the past’ during the nineteenth century (5). Bonnett, then, accepts the premise that contemporary definitions of nostalgia are born out of the social dislocations of Western industrialisation, and that its negative connotations of political conservatism and social decline were born out of nineteenth-century progressivism. However, Bonnett draws attention to the fact that ‘damning of the past had become an expected facet of revolutionary rhetoric’ (23) and that Marx repeatedly constructed his political rhetoric around an opposition between a barbaric past and a utopian future.

¹ Sarah Edwards is Lecturer in English Studies at the University of Strathclyde. Her publications include articles in *Women’s Writing*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Life Writing*, *Journal of Popular Culture* and the *Review of English Studies*. She is completing her first monograph, *The Edwardians Since 1910* and is the leader of an ESRC seminar series, *Nostalgia in the 21st Century* (2010-11), www.strath.ac.uk/nostalgia. She is also co-editing a collection of essays on literature and architecture, *Writing the Modern City: Perspectives of Literature, Architecture and Modernity*, for Routledge.

Bonnett then undertakes a brief review of some of the major twentieth-century theorists of nostalgia, including Linda Hutcheon, Fred Davis and Svetlana Boym. He claims that some of these theorists' categories of nostalgia – for example, Boym's 'restorative' nostalgia which seeks to reconstruct the past in contrast to the 'reflective nostalgia' which is ironic and fragmentary, and Hutcheon's ironic postmodern nostalgia (42-43) – reflect their own ambiguity about the emotion and the wider leftist tendency to value nostalgia only when it can be utilised for a specific political end. This seems a rather hasty dismissal of critics who also acknowledge, as Bonnett does, that nostalgia can be rooted in genuinely devastating loss (as Boym's work on post-Communist cities demonstrates). I am also not convinced that Bonnett's claims about the hierarchical relationship between nostalgia and memory studies are still valid, and indeed the works that he cites (by Lasch and Green) are nearly two decades old (43). Much recent work in memory studies, in the fields of life-writing, urbanism and politics emphasise the unreliability of memory and its representation.

On the other hand, Bonnett is undoubtedly right when he observes that serious scholarly and political interest in nostalgia has increased since the 1990s, and his claims that the failures of the left (for example, the collapse of communism and New Labour) have fuelled a sense of loss for the radicalism of the past are convincingly demonstrated. Indeed, he observes that in the twenty-first century, 'modernity is itself an object of nostalgia' (3). Bonnett usefully identifies the themes that situate nostalgia both 'in and against modernity' and left politics (1). Interestingly, he notes that 'radical' is derived from the Latin word for 'roots' and that many left political groups have both lauded 'the people' as a source of authenticity and solidarity in an alienated world, while retaining suspicions about localism and conservatism, while the green movement similarly locates authenticity in the natural world, yet progress is often associated with man-made technology and the subjugation of nature. By contrast, avant-garde groups such as Dadaism and Surrealism embraced the past precisely because it seemed primitive, taboo and therefore a new source of creative energy.

Bonnett undertakes nuanced close readings of a variety of texts from these and other movements, from manifestos to poetry and autobiography. By 'reading nostalgia against the grain of radical history', he identifies the narratives of loss and desire that undermine their ostensible meanings (1). He also identifies, and deconstructs, some well-loved 'characters' and their roles in the negotiation between radicalism and nostalgia: the 'old radical' who is both a symbol of commitment and of older, devalued ideas (30); William Morris, whose successful negotiation of nostalgic medievalism, socialism and empathetic humanity have cast him as the 'father figure' of the Labour Party (72); the young black man as a 'repository of revolutionary hope' in the anti-racist rhetoric of 1980s Britain, which allowed black history and socialist ideology to be meshed (122) and the situationist 'drifter' whose urban walking might represent both a reclamation of the street and a nostalgia for 'struggle and popular memory' (146).

The book's subsequent chapters are presented as a series of case studies of radical movements, framed by a brief introduction and summary. These sections are clear and effective, and suggest that the book is also aimed at a student audience: indeed, it would make a useful textbook for senior undergraduates and postgraduates in politics, history, cultural studies, human geography and urban studies. Within the main body of these chapters, Bonnett chiefly focuses on several individuals who both shaped their colleagues' thinking in significant ways and also demonstrate the unacknowledged tension between radical and nostalgic thinking. Indeed, the latter aim

sometimes supersedes the first and therefore some of the insights about the individual's ideas are not particularly original or convincing.

The first of these chapters focuses on three important figures in English socialism at particular historical moments from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century. Bonnett provides an excellent and convincing account of the 'rediscovery' of Thomas Spence, comparing the writings of Spence with later accounts to demonstrate how Spence's 'Plan' about land enclosure (couched in religiously inspired language about 'Nature's Plan') was used by later thinkers such as E. P. Thompson to situate him as a 'primal' and 'pre-political' figure (59-60, 66). The section on the relatively neglected Robert Blatchford and his Clarion movement also provides a convincing account of the way that Blatchford utilised a 'national tradition of popular conviviality' in order to effect the 'political transformation of the clubbable individual' (75). I do not really see any evidence, however, of the apparently 'defensive' nature of his nostalgic attachment to the past in his patriotic descriptions of rural England. As Bonnett says, Blatchford was not anti-modern either and nor, I believe, was William Morris. Morris is well-known as a nostalgic radical and this section provides an example of my earlier comment, that his inevitable inclusion supersedes the need to provide original insights. It is not credible to suggest that Morris 'compartmentalised' his nostalgia by relegating it to certain life stages, or to his literary (and therefore non-political?) endeavours. *News from Nowhere*, which is discussed as 'looking forward' to his withdrawal from politics, exemplifies his commitment to combining aspects of past and present (72).

The chapter on anti-colonialism and post-colonialism is one of the strongest sections, arguing that anti-colonialism provided a challenge to Western narratives of modernity, that indigenous forms of socialism, for example in India, developed their own nostalgic narratives and that communist colonialism has been written out of the Western socialist narrative of progress. Post-colonial theorists have rejected the essentialist focus on indigenous knowledge and the location of post-colonial studies within the academy often seems to provoke yearning for the activism of another age. The chapter on 'the melancholia of cosmopolis' is also an insightful account of the contradictions of cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitan supposedly transcends local attachments, yet left-identified thinkers routinely evoke the cosmopolitan neighbourhood. Bonnett provides two compelling accounts of previous readings of autobiographical and poetic texts which celebrate a warm community of 'single voices' and 'irreducible singularity'. Homi Bhabha's account of Adrienne Rich's poem is 'oddly innocent', offering an 'empathetic politics' of victimhood and resistance (120-21). Bonnett moves on to deconstruct Paul Gilroy's denunciation of 'sick nostalgia' in *After Empire*, suggesting that his solution, of 'conviviality', draws on nostalgic English socialism (125). Bonnett also critiques the focus on the young man as the focus of regeneration, indicating Gilroy's lack of awareness of the diversity of racial or religious groups. He also indicates the absence of women in his account, although Bonnett can be charged with the same. Despite occasional and cursory references to women and feminism throughout the book, Bonnett does not consider the fact that nostalgia and its manifestations – continuity, stasis, return to nature - have often been associated with women.

The chapter on situationism gives a convincing theorisation of the group's 'rooted nostalgia' for the political and popular memories contained in the buildings and streets of post-war Paris. Their 'drifts' through the streets, Bonnett argues, can therefore be characterised as a form of 'productive nostalgia' (145-46). The final

chapter on psychogeography begins with a section on Iain Sinclair's walks around the M25. As was the case with William Morris, Sinclair's inclusion as 'nostalgic radical' is perhaps inevitable but in order to maintain the central premise of the book, his musings on industrial landscapes and 'stuff of the previous era' are perceived as a source of 'tension' (157-58). Yet Sinclair's self-conscious awareness of these 'tensions' in his writing stands in stark contrast to the earlier narratives that Bonnett had to 'read against the grain'. Sinclair is surely aligned with the 'newly confident politics of nostalgia' that Bonnett identifies in the magico-Marxist groups (156), although I would argue that their radical landscape preservation has links with earlier groups such as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England who also sought to link conservation with reform and present-day utility.

Some images (of Blatchford's 'Merrie England' or the situationist cities) would have enhanced the discussions, and the book is let down by poor copy-editing. But this is a scholarly and stimulating work, which makes a valuable and much-needed contribution to the scholarship on nostalgia, modernity and left politics.